

War should be last choice

A pre-emptive attack will not secure a lasting peace

In a matter of days, our nation may invade Iraq. What lies ahead is unknown but surely momentous. As Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia said recently in an eloquent speech on the Senate floor, "To engage in war is always to pick a wild card. And war must always be a last resort, not a first choice."

There are many reasons why this war should be a last resort. A U.S.-led invasion in the face of the opposition of the entire Muslim world is a formula for fomenting more acts of terrorism here and abroad. Going forward without the full support of the U.N. Security Council, NATO and our allies will undermine our global influence and our ability to secure the peace in Iraq after a conflict. The success of the first Persian Gulf War and our intervention in Afghanistan were heavily dependent upon that broad support.

Moreover, armed conflict invariably brings horrific destruction and bloodshed; in Iraq, with half the population under the age of 15, surely children will suffer. Our own troops will be in grave danger as well. Many analysts believe Saddam Hussein is far more likely to use chemical and biological weapons if attacked than if the inspections process continues. A U.S. invasion could make him, as one expert put it, "a suicide bomber with global reach."

This war would put into effect the administration's revolutionary "pre-emption" doctrine unveiled last fall. This policy envisions, for the first time in American history, that the United States would make unprovoked attacks against potential threats. This policy is contrary to the values and rule of law for which our nation has always stood. It will shatter our stature in the world as a country

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that has successfully relied on (and urged other nations to rely on) diplomacy, deterrence and containment to keep the peace.

A policy of pre-emption would set a dangerous precedent if adopted by either India or Pakistan, both with nuclear arms, or by China. It could also lead us into a host of conflicts if other nations see an arms buildup as their only protection from a U.S. attack. A case can be made that North Korea's recent belligerent moves are in response to the pre-emption doctrine, as well as to our missile defense acceleration and refusal to engage in diplomacy.

The administration's ever-changing justification for war has moved from disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction to establishing a new, pro-Western democratic regime, according to the President's recent speech. This will require prolonged military control of Iraq, at huge cost. The Bush administration, the first in history to try to finance a war and its aftermath by reducing revenues (through large tax cuts), has not budgeted for occupation. Also, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War sparked the fanatical hatred of Osama bin Laden and his followers. Consider how the occupation of an entire Muslim country will be perceived.

A U.S. war against Iraq now is not the only — or best — choice.

I do not doubt that Saddam Hussein is a despot who presents a danger to the United States and the world. Nor do I doubt that our armed services — the best trained and best equipped in the world — would win. But I do not believe that a war waged against Iraq by the United States without broad international support is the best way to deal with the threat posed by Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction.

The U.N. inspections process, for all its imperfections, is containing Saddam and preventing the enhancement of his weapons of mass destruction capability. I agree with the majority of American people that U.S. military action without greater international support is premature, and that more time should be allowed for inspections.

We have known for more than a decade the danger posed by Saddam. Why we cannot wait a few months more is hard to fathom. Impatience is not a sufficient cause for war. The price of war is too high not to give peace a chance.

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